

Armitage Asked to Raise Religious Freedom on Visits to India, Pakistan, and China

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Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, has written to Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage requesting that he raise religious freedom concerns during his visit to India, Pakistan, and China later this month. The Commission specifically asked Mr. Armitage to raise the recent sectarian violence in Gujarat, India; attacks on Christians in Pakistan; the need to discuss religious freedom during the upcoming Bush-Jiang talks; and the situation of North Korean refugees in China.

The text of the letter follows:

August 15, 2002

Dear Deputy Secretary Armitage:

Pursuant to its advisory responsibilities under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to raise religious freedom concerns with the governments of India, Pakistan, and China during your visit to Asia later this month.

In India, we urge you to express publicly the U.S. government's profound concern about the widespread killing of Muslims in the state of Gujarat earlier this year. Sparked by the killing of 58 Hindus on a train, mobs of Hindus killed at least 1,000 Muslims, many of whom were mutilated and burned alive. There have also been instances of retaliatory violence against Hindus. Although some U.S. administration officials have commented in response to questions by reporters about the "horrible violence in Gujarat" and about their expectation that the Indian government would "do the right thing," as far as we know no senior U.S. administration official has expressed concern over the killings or called for accountability for those responsible. In fact, Secretary Powell said that the violence in Gujarat "did not come up in any of the conversations that I had in both India and in Pakistan" during his recent visit to the region. Although the Indian federal government has taken some positive steps, the situation in Gujarat remains highly volatile and highly visible in the Indian press. India's own National Human Rights Commission has detailed evidence of premeditation by members of Hindu extremist groups, complicity by Gujarat state government officials, and police inaction in the face of orchestrated violence against Muslims. Clearly it is important that the United States speak out publicly against such religion-based extremist violence, all the more so in view of our country's war on terrorism.

In Pakistan, we urge you to similarly speak out publicly against recent attacks on Christian targets, reportedly by Islamic extremists. Pakistan's government should forcefully combat such violence, punish its perpetrators, and work more effectively to foster an atmosphere of tolerance and respect for the rights of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. Unlike in the case of the terrible murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl (who was forced to "confess" his religion before he was killed), the Pakistani government has not demonstrated a similar resolve to find and bring to justice those directly responsible for recent attacks against Christians. We also hope that you will underline the Commission's conclusion that discriminatory religious legislation (notably, the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws) promotes religious intolerance that in turn encourages acts of sectarian and religiously motivated violence in which both Muslims and non-Muslims are victims. Despite the proposed Madrassa reform law, too many of Pakistan's Islamic religious schools continue to provide ideological training and motivation to those who go on to fight in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and who

take part in violence targeting religious minorities in Pakistan.

In China, in your meetings with Chinese officials in preparation for President Jiang Zemin's October 2002 visit to the United States, we urge you to ensure that religious freedom is a prominent agenda item for discussion between Presidents Bush and Jiang. Goals and benchmarks should be established prior to President Jiang's visit in order to measure progress in the protection of religious liberty in China, which has been designated by the Secretary of State as a "country of particular concern" under IRFA. Among these benchmarks should be the release of persons confined on account of their religion or belief and an end to the detention, imprisonment, torture, and other forms of ill treatment of Protestant Christians, Roman Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and other groups, such as Falun Gong, that the government has labeled "evil cults." Urging the Chinese government to take such steps would demonstrate a determination on the part of the administration to follow up on the recent visit to China of the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, from whom we await a report.

In addition, the Commission strongly recommends that you communicate to Chinese officials U.S. concerns about the situation of thousands of North Koreans who have fled to China and urge the Chinese government to abide by its international commitments to refrain from forcibly repatriating North Koreans and to grant refugee status to those who meet international criteria. In particular, there are reports that 12 North Koreans who, led by South Korean Pastor Chun Ki Won, were arrested by Chinese officials in December 2001 while attempting to enter Mongolia are now facing involuntary repatriation - where they will likely face severe penalties, some say including execution, upon their return due to the international publicity surrounding their case.

We understand that there are many interests that the U.S. government must pursue in each of these countries. However, we strongly recommend that religious freedom concerns be prominent in your dialogue with their governments. This is important not least because it is the protection of religious freedom and other human rights that has proven often to be the most effective guarantor that other U.S. interests will be advanced.

Respectfully,

Felice Gaer

Chair

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